LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO. 1213
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

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Honoré de Balzac was born at Tours on March 20, 1799. His father, Bernard François Balsa, or Balssa, was descended originally from a line of common day-laborers. He changed his name to Balzac obviously on account of social aspirations. Later, Honoré, for similar reasons, completed the evolution by prefixing, though without license, the royal particle, *de*.

Bernard François, after spending the greater part of his life as a humble peasant in the province of Albi, joined the army of Napoleon and was presently made a commissary officer.

And that, thought those who knew him, just about completed his biography. He was getting old now, and it was apparent that love had passed him by. But this was far from true. To everybody's astonishment, the old soldier of fifty-one suddenly took on the rôle of a sprightly and ardent lover; he began paying court to the belle of the regiment, Laure Sallambier, the beautiful eighteen-year-old daughter of a superior officer. Nor was this any mere flight of fancy or silly flirtation, for its result was the announcement of their betrothal.

Why this beautiful young heiress should "throw away her youth" on a man older than her father was a mystery to her friends, and very soon a mystery to herself. Adored by a multitude of suitors, she could have made a match

more in keeping with her beauty and sphere. The great Napoleon himself had not been indifferent to her charms. We are told that a close friendship had sprung up between them when the General was suddenly called away. Laure stood on a balcony, waving her handkerchief as he rode off; he turned and threw a kiss to her. Here the intimacy ended, much to Honoré de Balzac's regret—the novelist always longed to say that his mother had been beloved of Napoleon.

Laure and her husband settled down at Tours, where Bernard François had been given a post. A first child died in infancy, then Honoré was born. It is said that at the time of his birth, Laure, depressed because she had tied herself down to this prosaic bourgeois life, thought and dreamed constantly of Napoleon, who had become her idol—a fact which many consider significant.

Honoré was followed by two sisters and a brother, Laure, Laurentia, and Henri. On account of the death of the first child, Honoré and Laure were sent out to nurse with their foster mother. Brought up together, they naturally sought one another's companionship as soon as their minds began to shape, and thus was formed a friendship as close and lasting as that of the brother and sister in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*.

As a child, Honoré suffered greatly from want of affection. His desire to be loved, to be petted and comforted—a desire he carried with him throughout his entire life—was far

from being satisfied. His father was too old to devote much time to him, while his aristocratic mother, who had her theories about disciplining children, was so cold and reserved that, he tells, he never approached her without terror. But his early life was not entirely devoid of happiness. Besides the companionship of his sister, Laure, there were those wondrous, breath-taking moments when some beautiful stranger, won over by this chubby, large-eyed child who literally radiated warmth and affection, would fondle him and exclaim, "What an adorable little boy!"

At the age of eight, after a preliminary schooling at Tours, Honoré entered a college school in Vendôme, directed by Oratorian fathers. Here he spent six years of misery, which he has described so vividly in *Louis Lambert*. The school was conducted with military severity; the students were not permitted to leave its walls until their matriculation. Honoré, who felt a warm attachment for his family, became morbidly lonesome, all the more so because he was isolated from his classmates, who jeered at his apparent sluggishness.

The students were divided into four sections, classed according to "mentality." There were the *Mignons*, the *Smalls*, the *Mediums*, and the *Greats*. Honoré, of course, was a *Mignon*. In vain did the teachers strive to drill lessons into his slow brain; he was punished constantly for neglecting his studies. The methods of punishment were always severe, but one of them was a blessing; he was locked in his dormitory for several days, fed on bread and

skimmed milk, to meditate on his crimes. And in this "prison" he could get a breathing space, a chance to relax from the hated routine of class rooms and athletics, to find himself. . . . "Up to the age of twenty-one," he writes in *The Magic Skin*, "I was bent beneath a yoke of despotism as cold as that of a monastic order."

And while the teachers were abandoning the idea of educating him, Honoré was educating himself. He had a passion for reading—reading anything that was not in the prescribed course. By sacrificing his scant allowance to bribe the librarian, he could take out books from time to time and devour them in secret. Through these "contraband studies," as he calls them, his mind was slowly developed, he began to have ideas, then he desired to express these ideas. Thus came about the confused realization of his genius, the gradual awakening of that great inner "Force."

The *Greats* had a literary society which produced a play written by one of the students each semester. Honoré, undaunted by his "mental inferiority," decided to win their respect by writing a massive poetic drama, which would so overwhelm them when presented that they would fall on their knees in humble reverence and worship. . . . So he sat down and wrote a formless epic, as a result of which he became the laughing stock of the entire school; he was nicknamed "The Poet" and his awkward lines were burlesqued uproariously by students and instructors alike.

But Honoré, though deeply wounded, refused

to be discouraged. "Persecution and injustice," he tells us, "have given me a brazen audacity." Indeed it was more than mere audacity. The ridicule and jibes of his classmates and teachers served to build up a dogged, unwavering faith in himself, a firm belief in his own powers or possibilities, so that, in later life, when the *Greats* mocked at his efforts, he could face their attacks without batting an eyelash.

Well, as long as they did not understand him, he would no longer grant them the privilege of reading his work. The energetic and serious lad now commenced writing a *Treatise on Human Will*, digging his pencil into the paper in a furious effort to give expression to his thoughts, and thoughts to his expression. But though he kept the manuscript safely locked in a little box, he was caught unawares by one of the instructors, who forced him to yield his treasure. The instructor, promising him that he would suffer the torments of the damned for his heinous crime, glanced scornfully at the *Treatise*.

"So!" he snorted. "And it was for the sake of such nonsense that you neglected your studies!"

Such was his life at Vendôme, and it soon undermined his health. His ruddy cheeks became pale, his eyes blood-shot, his body weak and thin. The authorities were alarmed and sent for his parents. They were absolutely appalled when they saw him; even his reserved mother broke down and took him into her

arms. To his great joy, he was taken home and told that he would never have to return to the hated place. And for a while he was given the tender affection he had always longed for.

Long walks in the open country soon brought back his strength and color. He was entered in the day school at Tours, where, due to his parents' effective threat to send him back to Vendôme, he made fair progress.

He was still very shy, avoiding other children, particularly girls. When his sister Laure —his only companion during this period— urged him to play with her girl friends, he drew himself up with dignity and said with all the sophistication of a fourteen-year-old, "Women have no minds—all they can do is dance!" And when, in later years, some love-affair came to a tragic close, he often repeated this sage observation.

Laure, however, was the notable exception to the rule. To her he confided his innermost secrets, all his hopes and ambitions. Fired by her sympathy and interest, his self-confidence increased; "You will see," he told her firmly, "I am going to be a great man!" and he kept telling her this as time wore on until it was an established fact.

In a few years the Balzacs moved to Paris, where Bernard François had been given a new position. And now the family began to think about a career for Honoré, for he had reached the age of seventeen. Bernard François, who had remained in modest silence all these years, suddenly expressed the wish that his son study

law. Honoré did not object. "I shall be a great statesman," he told his sister. "Whatever I am, I shall be great."

So he entered law-school and, inspired by his political ambitions, applied himself to his studies with such unflagging intensity that he completed the course in three years and passed the examinations. In the meantime, his parents, knowing his nature, watched him with close scrutiny and made him toe the mark. The rigid discipline he was forced to undergo has been described by him in his *Magic Skin;* he was given an allowance barely sufficient to cover the expense of his books; his bedroom adjoined his father's study, and he had to retire at nine and rise at five; he was never allowed out of the house in the evening, his sole diversion being to participate—when his behavior was satisfactory—in a game of whist with his mother and grandmother.

But at the very moment he seemed launched safely on his career, he revolted. Through these years of hard study and discipline he had come gradually to know himself, to know his true needs and desires. . . . And when his father announced eagerly that a position with a reputable lawyer had been found for him, Honoré, to the utter consternation of the whole family, burst out furiously, "I won't take it! I won't be a lawyer! I'm going to write—or wring my neck!"

The Balzac household—save the sympathetic Laure—was in an uproar. They threatened to disown him, to cast him into the streets rather

than allow him to disgrace himself and his honorable family. But he would not budge an inch; he remained unmoved by all their threats and reproaches. "I will be a writer!" he kept shouting. The battle went on for days, until at last it was confined to father and son. The veteran fought vigorously, but he was well matched by Honoré's fierce obstinacy, and reluctantly but finally yielded. Honoré was to have a chance to follow his chosen path.

But this chance, by the time Honoré's mother had ratified it, was a slim and meager one, indeed! The literary aspirant was to be given two years—and only two years—to prove that he could make good with his pen, and he was to live by himself on an annual allowance of less than three hundred dollars—just enough to keep the clothes on his back. Nevertheless he was satisfied; it was as much as he had dared to hope for.

A few months later Honoré Balzac, at the age of twenty-one, was installed in a cheap, dark garret, high above the street, and left alone with his ambitions. The rest of the family, for economy's sake, moved to the suburb of Villeparisis.

The piece of literature by which he intended to earn his right to a career was to be a play, *Cromwell*, which he considered the finest subject in history. Never was a writer more determined or self-confident. "I want my tragedy to be the breviary of peoples and of kings!" he wrote his sister. "I must make my debut with a masterpiece or die!"

These days were comparatively happy, for, being a bad mathematician, he did not realize that he was living far beyond his means, and that his annual allowance was dwindling with alarming rapidity. In a few weeks he had scrawled off the last page of his tragedy, which he was certain would rival the first part of Goethe's *Faust* (then just issued). He appeared triumphantly before a grim tribunal composed of his family and some of their intimate friends, and, in an expressive voice commenced reading from his manuscript.

If he had expected that the play would move his audience, he was quite right. They were moved indeed! Their first thought was that he was playing a practical joke upon them, but when they realized how serious he was, they could only listen in speechless consternation. At last, unable to bear the trite, clumsy, and for the most part meaningless lines any longer, they ordered him to cease reading.

Then followed a scene far more dramatic than any in that wretched play. Honoré was attacked vehemently from all sides—even his sister did not spare him. He flew into a fury and shouted that nobody understood him or sympathized with his work. The play was too deep, too subtle for them! His father took him up on the statement; they would show the manuscript to a competent critic. Honoré, certain that such a person would appreciate it, agreed readily.

So *Cromwell* was entrusted to a venerable old literary professor, and Balzac's sister, Laure, tells us the rest:

"After a conscientious reading, the good old gentleman declared that the author of *Cromwell* had better follow *any other career in the world except literature!*"

II

"I should be very unjust if I did not say that from 1823 *to* 1833 *an angel sustained me through that hideous battle."—Letter to Madame Hanska.*

Balzac remained undaunted. "I shall not stop," he told his sister. "I shall go on and on until I attain my goal, and you will see the day when I shall be numbered among the great minds of my country." Holding his parents to their agreement, he returned to his garret and made a fresh start. To his dismay he suddenly realized that his allowance was gone, and his mother, determined to starve him into submission, coldly refused to advance him another *sou.* In his famous story, *The Atheist's Mass,* he gives us a vividly sensuous description of his wretched condition:

"I have endured everything: hunger, thirst, want of money and of clothes, of boots and shoes, and of linen—all the hardest phases of poverty. I have blown on my numbed fingers in that garret. . . . I worked through one winter when I could see my head steaming and a cloud of my own breath rising as you see the breath of horses on a frosty day. I do not know where a man gets his support to enable him to offer any resistance to such a life. I was alone, without help, without a *sou.* . . .

But . . . I had that fountain of noble sentiments and vivid sensibility which will always be the appendage of men who are strong enough to climb to any summit whatever, after having trudged for a long time through the sloughs of poverty. I could get nothing from my family, nor my home, beyond the meager allowance they made me. At this time, all I had to eat in the morning was a little loaf which the baker . . . sold me cheaper because it had been baked the evening before, or the evening before that. This I crumbled into some milk; so my morning meal only cost two *sous*. I only dined every other day, at a *pension* where the dinner cost sixteen sous. In this way I only spent nine *sous* a day. You can easily guess what care I had to take of my clothes, and my boots and shoes! I don't know whether we feel later as much trouble over the treason of a comrade as we feel . . . at the sight of the mocking grin of a shoe that is coming unsewed, or at the sound of a split in the lining of an overcoat. I drank nothing but water. . . . Should I ever be able, I said to myself sometimes, to take a cup of coffee with cream. . . .? Well, I carried into my work the fever with which my poverty inspired me. I tried to acquire positive details of knowledge, that I might possess an immense personal value and so observe the place I was to reach on the day when I passed out of my state of nothingness. I consumed more oil than bread; the light that lit me during those stubborn nights cost me more than my food. The struggle was long, obstinate, and without consolation."

But his hope never diminished. He kept writing what he thought were masterpieces, he kept trudging about from office to office, vainly endeavoring to interest some editor or publisher. And it was with deep regret that he accepted the end of his two years' chance.

He was summoned home and told that hereafter he would follow the advice of his parents, who knew what was best for him. But he wrote in secret, still determined to show them his true ability. His life at home was just as miserable—though in a different way—as his life had been in the garret, for he received nothing but bitter reproaches and accusations.

When his father decided that he must go and take some regular job—since that was all he seemed capable of doing—he could stand it no longer.

"Count me among the dead," he wrote his sister, who was now married and living at Bayeaux, "if they clap their extinguisher over me. I should turn into a trick horse, who does his thirty or forty rounds per hour, and eats, drinks, and sleeps at the appointed minute. And they call that living—that mechanical rotation, that perpetual recurrence of the same thing!"

Not for him! Despite his lack of funds, despite his past experiences, he packed his clothes and rushed back to Paris. Resolved to earn a living with his pen at any cost or sacrifice, he commenced writing pot-boilers, wretched "dime-novels" which he hoped would tide him through this period. He hated the work, but he forced

himself to it. Anything was better than the path his family wanted him to take. And at last the stuff began to sell; at last he could show that he was making money, though it was far from a living!

During this terrific struggle, he suffered most keenly from loneliness, from lack of companions. His sister Laure, the only person in whom he could confide, and whose faith and sympathy had given him strength to carry on the fight, was estranged from him by her husband. The latter was stupid and shallow enough to be jealous of her relationship with Balzac, and to prevent her from corresponding with him. Thus, Balzac was totally isolated from the world, and he could hardly endure the dreadful feeling of abandonment. The desire "to be loved" now overshadowed all others. He needed a comforter, a guiding angel, a *dilecta*.

. . .

And he found such a person in Madame de Berny.

The De Bernys were neighbors of the Balzacs' in Villeparisis. Honoré, in order to disarm his mother, had taken up tutoring as a sideline, and one of the first pupils he had managed to recruit was a twenty-year-old son of Madame de Berny's. And as he made his visits to the house, he gradually won the heart of his hostess and employer, the first woman really to recognize his genius, and his first love. . . .

Madame de Berny, née (Laure Antoinette) Hinner, was the daughter of a German musician, a harpist in the court of Louis XVI. Her

mother had been a lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette, and so she had no less than a king and queen for her godparents. Brought up in the ultra-refined environment of Versailles, she turned out to be a highly-sensitive woman, of exquisite grace and clairvoyant intelligence. We find an excellent analysis of her in these few lines from Balzac's description of *Madame Firmiani*, a character drawn directly from Madame de Berny:

"Have you ever met, for all your happiness, some woman whose harmonious tones give her a speech and charm that is no less conspicuous in her manners, who knows how to talk and to be silent, who cares for you with delicate feeling, whose words are happily chosen and her language pure? Her banter caresses you, her criticism does not sting; she neither preaches nor disputes, but is interested in leading a discussion and stops at the right moment. Her manner is friendly and gay, her politeness is unforced, her earnestness not servile, she reduces respect to a mere gentle shade, she never tires you, and leaves you satisfied with her and yourself. . . . This woman is quite natural. You never feel an effort. She flaunts nothing, her feelings are expressed with simplicity because they are genuine. Though candid, she never wounds the most sensitive pride; she accepts men as God made them, pitying the vicious, forgiving defects and absurdities, sympathizing with every age, and vexed with nothing because she has the tact of foreseeing everything. At once tender and gay, she first constrains then consoles you. You love her so

truly that if this angel does wrong, you are ready to justify her. Such was Madame Firmiani."

And such was Madame de Berny.

At the age of eighteen she was married to Gabriel de Berny, two years her senior. The union was extremely unhappy, despite the fact that it was strengthened by nine children. De Berny was a capricious fool, who refused to take his wife seriously and denied her the tender devotion her sentimental and romantic nature required. And so she watched the monotonous years pass by, hoping against hope that she would find true love some day. . . .

At the time she met Balzac, she was forty-five and a grandmother; he was less than twenty-two. But she was still exceedingly beautiful—the maturity of her mind, her sense of worldliness, enriching rather than diminishing her charm and grace. Besides, it is more than probable that Balzac was drawn to her by his need for maternal affection. Long denied the love of his own mother, he found a new mother in Madame de Berny. And Madame de Berny, for similar reasons, welcomed the opportunity to develop the latent genius of this bombastic and rough-mannered youth.

When Balzac said, "It is only the last love of a woman that can satisfy the first love of a man," he may not have been stating a universal case, but he was certainly stating his own. He was, in every sense, Madame de Berny's last love. From this time to her death she devoted herself to him entirely, notwithstanding

her bondage to her husband and children. Whether he was on top of the ladder or at bottom, whether he was faced by innumerable obstacles or was the triumphant victor of his enemies, whether he was rich or poor, she stood beside him and urged him toward his goal. Her devotion was so sincere, so free of all pettiness or selfish desire, that when she saw herself growing old and ugly, she ended their close relationship and ordered him to forget her. The importance of her role in Balzac's personal and creative development can hardly be overestimated. He himself was well aware of it, and said frankly in a letter to Madame Hanska (1837):

"Madame de Berny, though married, has been like an angel to me. She has been mother, sweetheart, family, friend and advisor; she has formed the writer, she has consoled the man, she has created my taste; she has wept and laughed with me like a sister, she has come day after day and every day to lull my sorrows, like a beneficent sleep. . . . Without her I should certainly have died. She often became aware that I had nothing to eat for several days, and she provided for all my needs with angelic goodness. She encouraged me in that pride which today my enemies reproach me for, as being a stupid self-satisfaction. . . ."

But it was Madame de Berny who, horrified by the dreadful pot-boilers he was writing, made the disastrous suggestion that Balzac go into business and "clean up," so that he could retire and devote himself to literature. Unable to write great books, he now decided to publish

them. His family was highly pleased by this sudden change of mind, and together with Madame de Berny, backed him with cash. In 1825 Balzac formed a partnership with a publisher named Canel, their first object being to bring out a new edition of La Fontaine's works.

Balzac's impractical mind and extravagant tastes were enough to doom any business venture. They fell into one hole after another, and often when fresh funds arrived from Madame de Berny or his parents, Balzac calmly used the money to purchase personal belongings. Indeed, he went even further than this. In one instance, he called for some leather appropriated for book-covers, and liked it so much that he took it to a shoemaker to have several pairs of shoes made from the leather for his personal use!

At last the partners quarreled, and the firm broke up—a total failure. Madame de Berny endorsed notes to the amount of 10,000 francs, which she never saw again. But her faith in Balzac remained as steadfast as his own, and when he announced that, having failed as a publisher, he would become a printer, she backed him with fresh capital. In 1826, Balzac, with a new partner, opened a little printing establishment in the Rue des Marais-Saint-Germain.

For a while things went smoothly. Balzac, profiting by his past experiences, was more careful and conscientious. The future looked quite hopeful.

And on the second floor of the establishment, he fitted up a little apartment—as luxuriously as his purse permitted—and here, each afternoon, he received his *dilecta*, Madame de Berny, who came to advise and comfort him, or to give him more money. Through her his true ambitions and ideals were kept alive, his genius fired. He was beginning to know happiness at last.

In fact, he became so happy that, thinking only of the future, he began to forget about his present duties. As a result, the excellent financial organization of the firm fell to pieces, and the debts piled up with alarming rapidity. Madame de Berny, hoping to put Balzac on his feet again, now bought him a type foundry at a cost of 36,000 francs.

This proved to be the most shortlived of all three enterprises. Madame de Berny's husband suddenly forbade her to advance another cent, for the simple reason that her resources were practically exhausted. In order to save the family honor, Balzac's mother, despite her fury at his failures, was forced to give up all her private savings. He emerged from the disaster at the age of twenty-nine, having amassed debts amounting to more than 100,000 francs.

But even when we take all these things into consideration, it is almost impossible to imagine the evasperated howl that rose from the throats of his entire family, when Balzac announced calmly but firmly: "Well, and now I am going to be a writer."

III

"I live by my friendships."—Letter to his sister, Laure.

The bitter reproaches of his family failed to move him, for Madame de Berny encouraged him to carry out his new plans. He intended to write a historical novel, the scene of which was to be laid in Brittany. As he knew some people living there who sympathized with his literary aspirations he wrote them a touching letter, imploring them to offer him an "asylum," a retreat where he could write his book in peace. Going back to his Paris garret, he waited in suspense for their reply. His condition was wretched; the little money Madame de Berny managed to advance him without her husband's knowledge was barely enough to keep him alive.

When the invitation finally came he was so excited that he rushed out of the house without even washing. His friends met him at Fougeries, and they were quite shocked by his slovenly appearance; his face was dirty and unshaven, his shirt wide open, his shoes unlaced, and, according to M. de Pontivance, one of the party, he was "wearing such a pitiful hat that it became necessary to conduct him straightway to the only hatter in Fougeries. That honorable tradesman went to infinite pains before he succeeded in discovering any headwear large enough to shelter the casket containing the *Comédie Humaine.*"

He set to work immediately, putting his heart and soul into his novel. Thus he wrote *The Chouans*, a frank imitation of Sir Walter Scott from which Balzac himself emerges in some rare passages written with that sweeping gusto of his, that extreme sensuousness which gives his work the tang of earthiness, the real flavor of human life and passion. . . .

This book, the first to which he signed his own name, was published by his former partner, Canel. Though fairly successful, it failed altogether to create the sensation Balzac had anticipated. The critics, who refused to take it seriously, greeted it with an indifferent silence more discouraging than the most damning criticism, and Balzac was heartbroken. He complained bitterly to Madame de Berny that the world was ignoring him, whereupon she gave him that memorable bit of advice: "Act, my dear, as though the whole multitude sees you from all sides, but do not cry out to it to admire you, for, from all sides, the strongest magnifying glass will be turned instantly upon you, and how does the most delightful object appear when seen through a microscope?" But Balzac would have preferred being seen through a microscope to not being seen at all.

Determined to make a great name for himself, he retired to his rooms in the Rue Casini, Paris, and plunged into a terrific orgy of work, writing with that fierce intensity and emotional concentration which we now call "Balzacian fury." His energy was prodigious; he worked eighteen hours a day with often no other stimulus besides black coffee, and managed to pro-

duce twenty-four books in the space of two years—an average of one a month! His complete surrender to the seclusion of art was symbolized by his monastic manner of living. He cut off all intercourse with the outside world, with the exception of Madame de Berny, and even his visits to her were rare. Dressed in the garb of a monk, he kept to his room, which itself resembled a monastery. The shutters were closed tightly, the sole illumination coming from a candle on his desk, the walls were unadorned, and all his belongings were limited to bare necessities.

Such a life was bound to tell on him. His strong, well-built body, denied the healthy stimulants of fresh air, good food, sanitary surroundings, and above all, relaxation, soon broke down. Sitting at his desk day after day, poisoning his stomach with huge quantities of vile black coffee, he became unhealthily obese and squat, as sometimes happens under such conditions.

But the life which undermined his body had the opposite effect upon his mind: his talents, far from suffocating in this dark and lonely environment, blossomed out. Shut off from the real world, he became a part of the imaginary world of his novels, which presently seemed real to him. He lived with his characters, and got to know them so well that he could write about them with lucid surety and amazing insight. His creative faculties were swinging into full power, and he knew it. "I am on the high road to become a genius!" he wrote joy-

ously to his sister: and a few weeks later came the breathless but triumphant announcement, "I *am* a genius!"

At last—and one wonders how it could have been delayed so long—there came that tormenting "dry period," when the powerful creative flow is suddenly turned off. Balzac felt completely emptied; his emotions were spent, his thought process exhausted. In vain did he sit all day long before the blank sheets of paper, trying to force his pen to write; the words would not come. Unable to seek forgetfulness in art, he became acutely aware of his isolation and wretched physical condition. A morbid loneliness obsessed him; the active energy and efflorescence which had formerly been channeled off in his writing now struggled fiercely for expression. The monastic environment became so stifling that he could no longer endure it. He threw open the shutters and seized his hat. He had to go out and live again!

And he lived. With that characteristic flair for the opposites, he emerged from his monastic "solitary confinement," as he now called it, and crashed right into society, entering a stage of extravagance and luxury which was soon to become exaggerated dandyism.

While his work had not been attracting very much attention, it was hailed enthusiastically by a multitude of intellectual women—particularly in the ultra-refined set of the Saint-Germain district—who, thinking they saw their own reflections in the noble heroines of his

novels, had become loyal and ardent Balzacians. Following close upon the publication of each book came a huge mass of feminine letters, many of them "mash-notes" which drove Balzac into ecstasies. He kept them all in a perfumed box, but he only replied to them in two fateful instances when his curiosity was aroused.

Now that he was accessible, he was besieged with invitations from the most noted ladies of France, who urged him to come to their *salons*. Balzac, his vanity flattered, accepted almost every one of them. He went to visit the beautiful Madame Récamier, whom he delighted by reading to her his manuscript; he frequented the *salons* of Madame Sophie Gay and her daughter Delphine, later Madame Girardin, of Madame Hamelin, the Duchess d'Abrantes, Mademoiselle Olympe Pillisier (later Madame Rossini) and scores of others. At these gatherings he met Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, and Lamartine, all of whom became his close friends. Alexandre Dumas, *père*, also sought his acquaintance, but Balzac turned away in scorn from "that Negro."

Another life-long friendship was formed with George Sand, who came to see him just as she was about to set forth on her hectic career. Balzac found her a delightful comrade, and called her "my brother George." But he never loved her, for their natures were so similar that they were not attracted to each other. During this period, they visited each other frequently. Balzac always promised to help George Sand

with her work, but as soon as he was brought around to the subject of writing, he remembered some novel or story he had in mind and commenced talking in blissful oblivion about that. One evening he went to her house to exhibit a new monk's robe he had purchased. She was giving a Bohemian party, and invited him to join her guests. After a little wine, Balzac carefully donned his new robe, picked up a seven-branched candlestick from the table, and in this manner insisted on accompanying George Sand and whoever else dared to follow in a solemn procession to the Luxembourg. They set out, and, according to George Sand, most of the evening was consumed in trying to convince a policeman that Balzac was sane.

In the meantime, a great change had come about in the Balzac family. Bernard François, at the age of eighty-four, had suddenly died, and his wife, alone and dependent, immediately looked to Balzac as the head of the family. Such was the irony of Balzac's fate that, when his mother at last gave him the affection he had always longed for, he did not need it. Nevertheless he pitied her, and promised to support her. She was so humble and meek that she did not even dare to protest against his writing. Instead, she wisely urged him to take the only step that would enable him to write and have money, marriage: a wealthy marriage. In this he was further urged by Madame de Berny, who was beginning to feel that she was an oppressive burden to him, and had even refused to see him on several occasions. Balzac, moreover, did not need much persuasion; he

already had his eye on a beautiful and wealthy young lady in the Faubourg-Saint-Germain.

This lady was Mademoiselle Eleanore de Trumilly, second daughter of his friend, Baron de Trumilly. Balzac, who was certain that she would swoon with happiness and gratitude when she learned that she was to become his bride, went to her father and announced haughtily that he would favor the Baron by becoming his son-in-law. The Baron was slightly taken aback, but he promised to "transmit the request to Eleanore." Eleanore was quite amused, but not too amused to reply with a forceful "No!" Balzac was absolutely astounded, then furious. He comforted himself by thinking of what a detestable creature she was, and how lucky he was to escape her.

He next courted Madame Laure Junot, the Duchess d'Abrantes. Balzac had met the beautiful widow at the *salon* of Madame Sophie Gay, and the two got along famously because they both had the same extravagant tastes. But though she seemed to love him, she was too much of an aristocrat to marry below her station, so Balzac left her home with a second refusal.

Undaunted, he now aspired to the hand of Mademoiselle Olympe Pillisier, and his courtship, begun for purely financial reasons, gradually became an infatuation on Balzac's part, and a dreadful bore on Mademoiselle Pillisier's. Balzac found in her the inspiration for his next book, *The Magic Skin*, and modeled his heroine, Foedora, after her. It is said that in order to

paint her all the better, he concealed himself behind the curtains of her bedroom one night and observed all her movements carefully—a striking example of the extreme measures he took for the sake of his art. When Olympe heard, from some mutual friend in whom Balzac had confided, that the novelist had paid her an uninvited and unknown visit, she was so furious that she forgot to be embarrassed. And when he had the audacity to propose to her on top of that, she threw aside her cold reserve and told him to go to the devil. He regarded her refusal with bitter regret all his life. She later married Rossini, the famous composer of *William Tell*—a man whom Balzac admired greatly.

Balzac took his wounded pride to Madame de Berny, who had always been ready to console him with monarchical principles. But Madame de Berny had now definitely decided they must sever close connections, for she was almost sixty. "Go away!" she cried. "You see me old and tottering!" He pleaded ardently, he told her that such superficial things as age did not count in this sacred attachment, but it was a vain appeal. Her unselfish devotion enabled her to be firm; she said that they must forget one another. And so, finally, he left her house, miserable and depressed. In his next book, *Louis Lambert*, he wrote his immortal farewell to the angel who had watched over him for fourteen years, "she, too, a flower of solitude whom the world has never watched, and who has been my star."

She lived only a few years longer, but those

were happy years, for she saw the flower of Balzac's genius, which she had raised with such tender care, bloom fully and gorgeously. When she went to her bed for the last time, she wrote him a brief but touching message, in which can be seen the depth and sincerity of her great love: "I can die. I am sure you have upon your brow the crown I wished there." Balzac was overcome by the tragic news of her death. "I have lost the being I love most in the world!" he cried. "Madame de Berny is dead. I can say no more on that point. My sorrow is not of the day; it will react upon my whole life."

IV

"I abhor Madame de Castries, for she blighted my life without giving me another—I do not say a comparable one, but without giving me what she promised."—Letter to Madame Carraud.

But now Balzac felt the need of another *dilecta*. "The feeling of abandonment and solitude in which I am stings me," he wrote. "There is nothing selfish in me; but I need to tell my thoughts, my efforts, my feelings, to a being who is *not* myself, otherwise I have no strength. I should wish for no crown if there were no feet at which to lay that which men may put on my head."

And so he hitched his chariot to a new star—and not a constant one either, for she led him into a beautiful romance only to give him a sudden and vicious *congé*.

In September, 1831, in the huge welter of mail from feminine admirers, came an unsigned letter, distinguished by its refinement and cleverness. The mysterious lady criticized *The Magic Skin* and *The Physiology of Marriage* so frankly and discerningly that Balzac succumbed to the temptation of replying to her, explaining his ideas. Thus a lively correspondence of critical repartee was established. Balzac, curious about the identity of this keen and witty woman, demanded her name, under the penalty of discontinuing his letters. She informed him that she was the Duchess de Castries, and invited him to call.

His vanity was flattered. The Duchess de Castries was one of the most highly courted ladies in the Faubourg-Saint-Germain, a dazzling Venetian blonde with pale and delicate features, who boasted of royal affinity and great wealth. Moreover, she was accessible, for she was just about to divorce a numbskull husband. Balzac, his optimism running high, rushed to her home, where she greeted him with visible signs of affection.

Henceforth he confined all his visits to her *salon*, and their relationship grew constantly more personal and outspoken. They began to play a game, in which Balzac, according to the Duchess, was the king. But she had to keep disarming him with a thousand delicate coquetries, for he had a lurking suspicion that he was really a pawn.

Madame de Castries had a lasting influence

on his life; it was she who transformed him into a great dandy, a social lion.

Though his books were bringing him a very scant income, since he was still quite obscure, his acquaintance with the wealth and ultra-aristocratic Duchess made him feel extremely prosperous. He moved into expensive quarters and hired a cook, a valet, and a coachman. He bought a white horse and a maroon carriage, thus fulfilling his great desire to ride about Paris in a cabriolet, with his monogram painted on the door in enormous letters. He not only followed all the latest decrees of style, but even founded an ultra-fashionable set of young men called the *Tigers*, who frequented the opera and the most expensive cafes of the city. He gave up wool for silk, and purchased no less than 31 waistcoats, announcing that his sole ambition was to have 365 waistcoats, one for each day in the year. In addition to this, he adorned himself with jewelry and saturated his clothes with a strong perfume which everyone detested except himself.

But still his vanity was not quite satisfied. He now conceived the idea that he was descended from a time-honored stock, a family of kings, whose coat-of-arms he painted beneath his monogram. When it was proved to him that he could not claim even the most distant kinship with these ancient noblemen, he laughed with cool disdain, snapped his fingers and snorted, "Well, so much the worse for them!"

The Duchess de Castries kept tightening her

net about him, declaring that she loved him passionately, and pledging faithfulness. She begged him to travel with her through Aix to Geneva, where they would spend a beautiful honeymoon. Balzac was overjoyed, but he still had suspicions about the sincerity of her devotion.

"It is necessary that I go and climb about Aix, in Savoy," he wrote Madame Carraud, an old friend of the family to whom he confided his innermost secrets, "to run after someone who, perhaps, will laugh at me—one of those aristocratic women of whom you no doubt have a horror; one of those angelic beauties to whom one ascribes a soul; a true duchess very disdainful, very loving, subtle, witty, a coquette, like no one I have yet seen, and who says she loves me, who wants to keep me in a palace at Venice (for I tell you everything!), and who desires I should write nothing, except for her; one of those women who must be worshiped on one's knees when they wish it, and whom one has such pleasure in conquering, a woman to be dreamed of, jealous of everything."

He was forced to delay the trip, however, because of a sudden emergency which he should have anticipated, but did not. One day he felt in his pockets and discovered that they were empty; his wild extravagances had, as usual, caused his money to evaporate. With creditors on all sides loudly threatening to send him to prison, he finally sold his beloved horse and carriage; but even this sacrifice, which was not made without tears, could not put him on his

feet. In order to obtain funds, he had to complete his next book, which happened to be *Louis Lambert*. After promising his Duchess to join her at Aix as soon as possible, he fled to the home of some friends in Sache and buried himself in work. He left his affairs in charge of his unfortunate mother, who was now ready to devote the remainder of her life to him.

Arriving in Sache, he switched once more from one extreme to the other, living on the old monastic scale of self-denial and working with new activity.

"He had a big alarm clock," says M. Salmon, one of the guests, "for he slept very soundly, and he set the alarm for two o'clock in the morning. Then he prepared himself some coffee over a spirit lamp, together with several slices of toasted bread; and then started to write in bed, making use of a desk so constructed that he could freely draw up his knees beneath it. He continued to write in this manner until five o'clock in the afternoon, taking no other nourishment than his coffee and his toast. At five o'clock he rose, dressed for dinner, and remained with his hosts in the drawing room until ten o'clock, the hour at which he withdrew to go to bed. And he never in the least modified this settled routine!"

In this manner he managed to complete *The Biographical Notice of Louis Lambert* in a little over three weeks, as a result of which he had an apoplectic stroke and came near dying. Before joining the Duchess de Castries, he went to the home of Madame Carraud in Angoulême to

take a rest, under his doctor's orders. To his astonishment he found himself looked upon as a celebrity by the townspeople. When he went to get a haircut an excited crowd followed him, pushing and shoving to gain a position before the window of the little shop. His hitherto servile attitude toward his publishers changed immediately. He wrote his mother, instructing her not to go and see the editors, but to make them call on her. She was to demand 300 francs a page for the first serial rights, "without reduction for blank spaces," and his contributions were "to be printed in the largest type possible."

As soon as he had recovered sufficient strength to stand the trip, he hurried to the side of his beloved. But his happiness in being with her was slightly marred by a letter from his mother, informing him that his debts were still in such a pitiful state that, unless he took immediate measures, his house would be confiscated. He knew there was only one thing to do, as much as he hated to do it; he must write another book. The Duchess told him to proceed, that she would not hinder him, but would be there to comfort him when he was tired and depressed. His doctor, however, forbade him to work. Balzac replied with jocular irony that he would write a story about a doctor, and that would keep him well. So he commenced his *Country Doctor*, one of his most famous novels.

"I have a simple little chamber," he wrote Madame Carraud, "from which I can see the

entire valley. I force myself ruthlessly to rise at five o'clock in the morning, and work beside my window until five-thirty in the evening. My breakfast is an egg, sent in from the club. Madame de Castries has some good coffee made for me. At six o'clock we dine together, and I pass the evening with her."

A few months later he completed the first draft of his novel, and his mother managed to hold off his creditors by telling them that the new book was bound to bring a fortune. How Balzac stood the strenuous work, after his apoplectic stroke, was a mystery to his doctor, who now warned him for the last time to take a good rest. But Balzac no longer needed persuasion. Taking his mind away from the subject of debts, he set out with his Duchess for Geneva to live an ideal love-life.

They arrived at Geneva and took rooms at a hotel. For one week Balzac was in a state of supreme happiness and exaltation, oblivious of all his troubles. Then, with an abrupt suddenness that almost wrecked him, Madame de Castries gave him his *congé*.

Just what happened is not known. In the original confession added to the manuscript of *The Country Doctor*—later substituted by another and impersonal one—Balzac, speaking through the mouth of his hero, declares indignantly that he can give no explanation of Madame de Castries' cruelty. "Apparently," says Mary Sandars, Balzac's capable biographer, "she parted from him one evening with her

usual warmth of affection, and the next morning everything was changed, and she treated him with the utmost coldness."

At any rate, Balzac suddenly rushed back to Paris, where, despite his health, he drowned his remorse in another frightful orgy of work. He revised *The Country Doctor*, determined to write a book that would sell by the thousands and set him on his feet for good. But, as usual, he was doomed to bitter disappointment. The book not only failed, but his publisher brought suit against him for violation of some section of their contract. His debts piled higher and higher, and, added to the wound inflicted by Madame de Castries, nearly drove him insane. He staggered under their load, crying for mercy to the lawyers and brokers who were accomplishing his ruin with mathematical indifference.

"Why," he exclaimed, "I have been bowed down by this burden for years; it hampers the expansion of my life, it disturbs the action of my heart, it stifles my thoughts, it puts a blight on my existence, it embarrasses my movements, it checks my inspirations, it weighs upon my conscience, it interferes with everything; it has been a drag on my career, it has broken my back, it has made me an old man! My God, have I not paid dearly enough for my right to bask in the sunshine? All that calm future, that tranquillity of which I stand so much in need, all gambled away in a few hours or exposed to the mercy of Parisian caprice—which for the moment is in a censorious mood."

How typical of Balzac is that last phrase! In his pitiful cry of anguish and despair, he still clings desperately to hope, forcing himself to believe that his wretched condition is only momentary, that things will be mended presently. And it was just this tremendous spirit, this amazing nature which refused to give in, that enabled him to forge ahead, fighting against odds, until his colossal task of building the monument of the *Comédie Humaine* could be completed.

In a few weeks he was hard at work on a new novel, *The Duchess de Langeais*, which, of course, he was certain would end his troubles. And in this book he took his revenge upon Madame de Castries, painting a malicious portrait of her coquetry and lack of understanding. "This was a woman artificially educated," he wrote, "but in reality ignorant; a woman whose interests and feelings were lofty, while the thought that should have controlled them was wanting." The book describes his own experiences: a flippant society woman amuses herself with a sensitive and sincere man, then casts him off indifferently.

Nevertheless, he did not want the powerful Duchess for an enemy when the book came out, because she might easily prevent its success through several of the leading critics, whom she had enslaved. And so, convinced that his description of her shallowness would be proved by her failure to recognize the portrait, he went to her house and, taking an ironic attitude of exaggerated humility, begged her to read his

story. His expectations were more than realized; she not only approved of the book, but said it was the best he had written!

When it came off the press, however, either she read it more carefully or some clever person pointed out its true significance, for she became infuriated and vowed to avenge herself on Balzac.

"Here I am on bad terms with the Duchess de C——," wrote Balzac to Madame Carraud, and then added viciously, "Well, so much the better!"

The Duchess was so furious that she lowered herself to the extent of playing a practical joke on her former lover. She had engaged as an English teacher an old Irish woman named Miss Patrickson. Since Miss Patrickson greatly admired the work of Balzac, and desired to translate some of his novels, the Duchess decided to use her as a tool. Telling her that the best way to get in Balzac's good graces was to play a little joke that would appeal to his sense of humor, she had her write him a wild love-letter, signing herself as a noble Englishwoman, "Lady Nevil." Balzac was quite suspicious, but he answered the note anyway. A rendezvous was arranged at the Opera. On the appointed night, however, Madame de Castries came to Balzac and insisted on accompanying him. He then realized that he had been duped, but he was determined to see the thing through at any cost.

"I go to the opera," he wrote Madame Carraud. "No one there. Then I write a letter,

which brings the miss, old, horrible, with hideous teeth, but full of remorse for the part she had played, full of affection for me and contempt for the Duchess. Though my letters were extremely ironical and written for the purpose of making a woman masquerading as a false lady blush, she (Miss Patrickson) had recovered them. I had the upper hand of Madame de C———. She ended by divining that in this intrigue she was on the down side. From that time forth she vowed me a hatred which will end only with life."

They saw each other a few more times, meeting by chance at the home of some joint friend. In a few months, however, he wrote Madame Carraud: "I have broken the last frail relations with Madame de C———."

And so the Duchess was forgotten, until she played another little joke which cost Balzac no small amount of grief and trouble, for it put him in a foolish position with the new guiding angel who had come into his life, and with whom he had entered a romance destined to overshadow all others, his last and greatest love. . . .

V

"And they talk of first love! I know of nothing so terrible as the last. It is strangling!"—Quinola.

Shortly after the Duchess de Castries gave him his *congé*, Balzac received a letter from faroff Ukraine, "starred with happiness and

hope," and destined, though he did not suspect it, to change the entire course of his life. Its writer signed herself anonymously as "L'Etrangère" ("The Foreign Lady"), saying that she had read one of his novels, and was so impressed by his talent that she could not resist sending him a few words of praise and encouragement. Balzac was highly flattered, but, under the tremendous pressure of debts and work, put the letter in his perfumed box and soon forgot about it.

L'Etrangère, however, was not so willing to be forgotten; in a few months she sent another flattering missive. "A line from you," she wrote dramatically, "published in the *Quotidienne*, will assure me that I may write you without fear. Sign it 'A L'E. H. de B.' ('To *L'Etrangère*. Honoré de Balzac')." Balzac, charmed by the mystery of the situation, put the line in the following issue of the paper. The curtain had risen; the "grand and beautiful soul-drama," as he later called it, was about to begin.

Her letters now began to pour in regularly, and her tone changed from admiration to adoration. Who was this *Etrangère?* The very fact that he was ignorant of her true name and address, fed his imagination and deepened his interest. To him she became all the women he had ever loved, amalgamated into a harmonious and beautiful whole, an image of ideal womanhood, the "Eternal Feminine." And out of this overwhelming conception grew his infatuation for a woman whom he had never seen.

But he did not disregard the realistic side of the question either; her failure to reveal her identity, so that he could reply to her letters, drove him into despair. He was tortured by the fear that he would have to go through life without meeting this "Polar Star."

But then, as if she had divined his thoughts through some deep intuition born of love, *L'Etrangère* suddenly flung off her mask and revealed herself as Evelina Hanska, née Rzewuska, a Polish countess who could claim affinity with the queen of France, and whose husband was one of the wealthiest men in Russia. Balzac, who had endowed her already with flawless beauty and supreme intelligence, was overjoyed to hear that she was also wealthy and of noble birth. In his first letter to her he literally knelt before her in servile respect and humble gratitude, begging her to continue the correspondence. Thus began his famous series of *Lettres à l'Etrangère* which, in addition to their excellent analytical portraits of many eminent figures of the day, furnish biographers with the only authentic information on the latter part of Balzac's life.

Until recently, the life and character of Madame Hanska remained shrouded in mystery. Her niece, Princess Radziwell, is responsible for throwing new and true light on the subject* to offset the ridiculously false stories supplied by imaginative biographers to fill in gaps. The

*"New Light on Balzac's Marriage," by Catherine, Princess Radziwell. (The Forum.)

Princess settles the long controversy over Evelina's age by giving the date of her birth as December 24, 1801, which means that she was thirty-one and Balzac thirty-three at the time their correspondence began. Evelina was brought up in a cultural and refined environment, and turned out to be a remarkable and gifted woman, a fact which explains how she was able to do so much for Balzac. At the age of nineteen, the beautiful Polish girl was married to Wenceslas de Hanski, a man much older than herself and totally inferior to her in every way, who later became an invalid, suffering from hypochondria and "Blue Devils." Evelina never really loved him; the union, as was customary in those days, was arranged entirely by the two families, the couple having nothing to say in the matter.

Madame Hanska's life, up to the time Balzac entered it, was monotonous and devoid of romance. Except for occasional travels, she lived with her invalid husband on their estate in Ukraine, a large, cheerless manor secluded completely from the rest of the world, with the nearest village miles away. Out of five children, only a daughter, Anna, survived. Madame Hanska's fierce devotion to the girl was later to play an important part in her romance with Balzac, but it scarcely served to give her the affectionate and intellectual companionship for which she yearned. As a relief from ennui and depression, she buried herself in literature, reading any of the latest novels that found their way into her home. And thus she became acquainted with the work of Balzac,

whose talent impressed her so deeply that she wrote him her first letter. But she never dreamed that she would some day become the wife of this genius.

They corresponded for two years before they actually met, and it was through these letters that they confessed their overwhelming love for one another, pledging to be faithful until death. But Balzac, still suffering from his experience with Madame de Castries, could not keep back the fear that this new romance, which had begun in a similar manner, might end just as tragically and plunge him into fresh griefs. "I tremble as I write you," he cried. "Will this be only a new bitterness? Will the skies for me ever grow bright again? I love you, my *Etrangère*, and this strange thing is the natural effect of an empty life, filled only with ideas!"

He became her slave. He let his hair grow as long as possible, then cut off a lock and sent it to her. He used money that should have gone to creditors to buy her silly presents, though she begged him not to, and often drove him to despair by refusing them. And in the revised proofs of *The Country Doctor*, he gave her name, Evelina, to one of the important characters.

He implored her, again and again, to let him meet her, saying that he would manage somehow to gain sufficient funds for a trip to Russia if she gave him the word. Although she would have loved to entertain the great genius in her home, she was still too reserved to extend such an invitation, and kept putting him off. But,

early in 1833, she traveled with her husband to Neufchatel, Switzerland, and Balzac, hearing that she was so close to Paris, could no longer resist the temptation to see her, despite the fact that her husband's presence would doubtless make the situation rather embarrassing. He dropped all work immediately, obtained money in some miraculous fashion, and hastened to Switzerland, once more leaving his mother in charge of his affairs.

We do not know the details of that first meeting. There is a romantic story—supported by the fact that Balzac related it in a novel which undeniably concerns his relationship with Madame Hanska—that, upon his arrival, he happened to glance up at a window, and there saw his angel, whom he recognized at once, staring down upon him with inexpressible emotion. There is another story that they met conventionally in a hotel, which is a little more plausible.

At any rate, both received a severe shock when they did meet. The ultra-refined and sensitive Madame Hanska was repelled, momentarily at least, when she came face to face with an elephantine figure who remained as wide as he was tall despite his desperate attempt to heighten his stature with a pair of high-heels, over which he was tripping constantly; who dressed with a lavishness that was repulsive, talked loudly and incessantly about his own accomplishments, and had table-manners which were coarse and vulgar. Her first reaction to the meeting is well expressed in a letter to her brother, Count Rzewuski, in which she says:

"At last I have met Balzac, and you will be wondering whether my infatuation for him, as you call it, will be cured or not. You remember you always prophesied he would eat with his knife and wipe his nose on his serviette. Well, if he did not actually commit the former crime, he was certainly guilty of the latter!"

And Madame Hanska, on the other hand, could scarcely have been expected to live up to the divine image of Balzac's imagination, for she was, after all, just a woman.

But this disillusion was only momentary. Two years of correspondence had given birth to a love that was bound to overshadow all personal faults or shortcomings. Madame Hanska soon found herself so dazzled by the genius that she accepted the man. Her feeling was doubtless similar to that of Lamartine, who said that though Balzac's body was extremely obese "there was so much soul in it that it was borne lightly and joyously, like a supple envelope."

Balzac, for his part, reshaped his vision until it became the real Madame Hanska, and in a short time he was writing his sister, Laure:

"I am happy, very happy! She is twenty-seven [a slight error of five years!], has the most beautiful black hair, the smooth and deliciously fine skin of a brunette, a lovely little hand, and is naive and imprudent to the point of embracing me before everyone. I say nothing of her great wealth. What is it in comparison with her beauty? I am intoxicated with love!"

However, he found the presence of M. de Hanska very annoying:

"Alas!" he cried. "He did not quit us during five days for a single second. He went from his wife's skirts to my waistcoat, and Neufchatel is a small town where a woman, an illustrious foreigner, cannot take a step without being seen. Constraint doesn't suit me!"

Nevertheless he was in high spirits, for he had found another dilecta who could inspire him with fresh hopes and courage, and who—best of all—understood him. Once they accepted one another as they really were, the bond between them was strengthened; the deep human element had entered their romance. And they were happy.

It was at this well chosen moment that the Duchess de Castries resorted to her second practical joke—her last and most bitter gesture of triumphant rage. Through some means she had learned of Balzac's new romance, and through some other means, she posed as his jealous wife—so successfully that Madame Hanska came near breaking off relations with him. The unhappy novelist swore by everything under the sun that he was a bachelor, trying desperately to explain the situation. But his explanation only deepened Madame Hanska's humiliation; she accused him bitterly of loving another. Though finally they were reconciled, Madame Hanska could never bring herself to trust him wholly, and, during the following years, he was forced constantly to face her grave reproaches. So the Duchess de

Castries, with true feminine ferocity, had had the last say after all!

Except for this cruel shadow, Balzac passed a week of beautiful companionship, and he parted from his "Polar Star" with tearful reluctance and tender hope. Then he went back to Paris to face reality—which met him in the form of a mob of angry creditors, howling for their money.

Before returning to Russia, Madame Hanska was planning to spend several months in Geneva. Balzac, anxious to rush to her side again, determined to write a novel in two weeks. But the love that was soon to inspire his best work now hindered him from practical concentration. "My loved angel," he wrote her, "I am almost mad on account of you, as mad as a man can be! I cannot put two ideas together without you coming between them. In spite of myself my imagination always brings me back to you." As a result he could not get away until the end of the year.

Upon his arrival in Geneva, where Madame Hanska had prolonged her stay at his request, he found a beautiful golden ring from her awaiting him. He placed it on his finger and henceforth refused to part with it. It inspired his next great novel, *Seraphita.*

When they met again, both knew that they would never be happy until they possessed one another. "I saw you yesterday," wrote Balzac, "so beautiful, so admirably beautiful. Yesterday all evening I said to myself, 'She is mine!' Oh, the Angels are not so happy in Paradise

as I was yesterday." His adoration became so fierce that it soon overshadowed everything else: "Fame, self-love, literature, they are scarcely clouds in the sky. You trample all that twenty times a day beneath your feet, which I kiss twenty times."

Already the subject of marriage had been approached and discussed, but only with ironic bitterness, for both realized the innumerable and seemingly unconquerable obstacles that lay before them. Madame Hanska was married, she had a daughter with whom she would not part, and her aristocratic family—who wielded no small influence upon her—would never consent to a marriage so beneath her social sphere. They did not excuse Balzac on the grounds of his genius, of which they were doubtless quite unaware. And so a tragic element entered their romance, the pathos of separation, with hope fighting against despair. . .

After forty-four days with his "Eternal Eve" Balzac returned once more to Paris. Urged on by the incentive of another visit, he buried himself in the seclusion of his work. He hid in a little house in Chaillot, calling himself "The Widow Durand." As a precaution against unpleasant interruptions, no one was admitted unless he could give a mysterious password. Men like Victor Hugo and Theophile Gautier felt rather ridiculous when, in order to pass the stalwart servant, they had to say, "The season for plums has arrived!" and to gain entrance to Balzac's study: "The doctor reports that the Widow Durand's health is satisfactory. May God bless her!"

Madame Hanska now became a tremendous inspiration. He wrote with a gusto and spontaneity greater than he had ever known, and in the course of a year turned out *Seraphita*, *The Lily of the Valley*, *Père Goriot*, *The Atheist's Mass*, *The Interdiction*, and several other lesser known books.

In May, 1835, he met Madame Hanska for the third time in Vienna. It was a tragic visit; Madame Hanska, unable to surrender herself to her lover, decided that it would be wisest for them to stop meeting. And though Balzac pleaded fervently, he knew too well that she was right, that it was futile to go on making each other unhappy. . . .

So he left her, depressed and disillusioned. He could not help realizing the folly of that trip, which had cost him over 5,000 francs. Arriving in Paris, he found his affairs in a terrible shape; his debts had piled up higher than ever, his mother was ill, and, to make matters worse, he was detained in prison a few days for evading military service. Life became a torture; a grim future of debts, of ceaseless striving after goals he could not reach, of a hopeless passion, loomed up before him.

But as long as he was alive, as long as he could still struggle, he refused to surrender. Instead, he put his nose to the grindstone in a fierce effort to pull himself out of this miserable condition, pouring his despair into his work, always hoping to turn out a best-seller, forging ahead. . . . He broke all records for endurance; there were times when he wrote 21 hours a day!

VI

"I have had neither a happy youth nor a blooming spring; I shall have the most brilliant of summers and the mildest of autumns!"—Letter to Madame Carraud.

Each new manuscript was sent Madame Hanska, who read it and expressed her opinion. Her letters in spite of their tone of sorrow and hopelessness, uplifted him during this terrific struggle, his only light in the darkness. . . .

But a nature such as his could not live long on letters alone. Unable to see his "Polar Star" he allowed himself presently to respond to the affectionate glances of other women. In 1836, after gaining a fresh foothold, he emerged from his seclusion. His doctor advised another rest, so he went to Guérande, allured by the charms of the beautiful Madame de Valette. Here he managed to forget his troubles for a few days, taking his meals at the quaint hotel he describes in *Beatrix*, and listening to the idle chatter of his delightful companion, who called him "My dear beloved treasure," and would answer only to the name, "Bambouino."

Madame Hanska, who heard rumors of his escapé, was deeply offended, and stopped writing him. But he pleaded her forgiveness, telling her that even if he "looked at other ladies," she remained his great Star, shining brightly above him wherever he went. This reconciled her, but not for long. She was always forcing

him to explain himself, always suspecting him of fresh intrigues. Though her suspicions were sometimes quite correct, they were often ridiculous; she was silly enough to accuse him of forming a *liaison* with Madame Récamier, whom he saw about once a year. It seems she even consulted fortune-tellers about his behavior, for we find him writing: "tell your fortune-teller that her cards have lied, and that I am not preoccupied with any blonde except Dame Fortune."

There was one woman, however, who occupied his time considerably.

This was Madame de Visconti, an Englishwoman married to a wealthy Italian count. Balzac shared the same box with her at the opera and Madame Hanska, who managed somehow to keep track of all his movements, reproached him immediately. His reply was bitter, for these constant cross-examinations were beginning to exasperate him:

"Must I renounce the Italian opera," he asked, "the only pleasure that I have in Paris, because I have no other seat than in a box where there is also a charming and gracious woman? If calumny, which respects nothing, demands it, I shall give up music also!"

But this did not satisfy Madame Hanska; she demanded a full explanation, telling him he could be perfectly frank with her. And he was:

"Madame de Visconti," he wrote, "of whom you speak to me, is one of the most amiable women, of an infinite, exquisite kindness, a delicate beauty. She helps me much to bear my

life. She is gentle, and full of firmness, immovable and implacable in her ideas and repugnances. She is a person to be depended on . . . It is a friendship which consoles me under many griefs." Then, perhaps because he feared he had said more than was good for him, he added, "but, unfortunately, I see her very seldom."

It was about this time that Balzac, finding himself with some money, built a house in the suburbs so that he could shelter his mother and become a landed proprietor.

Les Jardies, as he called his estate, cost him no small ridicule. Balzac insisted on being his own architect, and though he made his plans with painstaking earnestness, he forgot to include a staircase. As a result he had to stick one outside, and the Press seized the incident as an opportunity for satiric comment and caricature.

"This house," said one stinging article, "in which no doors or windows are to be found, and which is entered through a square hole in the roof, is furnished throughout with an oriental luxury of which even the pashas themselves would be incapable of forming an idea. The great novelist's private study has a floor inlaid with young girl's teeth, and hung with superb cashmere rugs that have been sent to him by all the crowned heads of the Universe. As to the furniture, the chairs, sofas, and divans, they are one and all stuffed with women's hair, both blonde and brunette, sent to the author of *La Grenadière* by a number of women of thirty

who did not hesitate a moment to despoil themselves of their most beautiful adornment—a sacrifice all the more rare since they have passed the age at which hair would grow again!"

As a matter of fact, by the time Balzac moved into his new quarters, his money was gone, and he could scarcely afford any furniture at all. He was referred to now (by Chasles) as "the man who bathes in a marble tub but who has no chairs on which to sit or seat his friends." The bare walls depressed him so much that he made a desperate effort to remedy them. With a huge black crayon, he would write, in one spot: "Here is a superb piece of Flemish tapestry of the 13th century," or in another, "Here is a magnificent painting by Raphael, of the De Balzac collection." In similar manner, wonderful paintings by Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, and others, were given their places. And after a while Balzac felt as though he actually had all these wonderful possessions, and was extremely proud of them.

He now sought means of making a fortune out of his property. After going over several speculative schèmes, he finally decided to devote himself to the raising of pineapples:

Here was a project! [says Théophile Gautier] A hundred thousand square feet of pineapples were to be planted on the grounds of *Les Jardies*, metamorphosed into hothouses which would require only a moderate amount of heating, thanks to the natural warmth of the place. . . . This was nothing; Balzac had a thousand

projects of the same sort, but the beautiful thing about this one was that we went together to the Boulevard Montmartre to look for a shop in which to sell the pineapples that were not even planted. The shop was to be painted black, with gold trimmings, and there was to be a sign, proclaiming in enormous letters: "Pineapples from *Les Jardies*."—However, he yielded to our advice not to hire the shop until the following year, in order to save a needless expense!

He worked strenuously on his novels, but still his debts increased. In a desperate effort to gain enough money to hold on to his property, he turned to the theater and commenced writing plays, saying that "it was more a question of establishing a literary porkshop than a reputation."

His first play, *Vautrin*, was produced on March 14, 1840, with disastrous results. The actor who played the role of Jacques Collin, trying to be clever, made himself up to resemble Louis-Philippe, and so infuriated the king that he immediately banned the production. So Balzac returned to *Les Jardies* in low spirits, disappointed again.

A few days later he received another terrific blow; the walls of his house, built after his inadequate plans, suddenly collapsed, and he did not have the money to restore them. With a horde of angry creditors on his trail, he sold out his estate at once—at a loss, of course—and hid himself in a little cottage in Passy, now the Balzac museum. As a measure of precaution, he confided his address to no one

except Madame Hanska, whose letters, once more, proved his only light in the darkness, the beacon which kept giving him new courage and hopes.

Here he remained, working furiously, until 1842—the year that was to be so fateful for him. Then he moved to modest quarters in Paris, his mother going with him.

His complete works were now published *en masse* under the famous title: *La Comédie Humaine* and now at last, the world was impressed, and though his genius was still unrecognized, Fame, "that pretty lady whose kisses are so desirable," as he expressed it, was beginning to smile upon him.

But at that very moment he was in the depths of despair and suspense. For months now, he had received no letter from Madame Hanska. He reproached her with pitiful gentleness, but it was to no avail. Thinking that his own negligence as a correspondent was the cause of her silence, he wrote her this brief but pitiful message:

"Ah! You write me no longer because my letters are rare! Well, they are rare because often I did not have the money to post them, but I would not tell you that!"

In his desperation he went about to soothsayers and clairvoyants, trusting them with dogged superstition and childish faith. In six months he received at last a letter from Madame Hanska, telling him that her husband had died!

Balzac wanted to leave for Russia immediately, but she forbade him to do so. Almost

two years passed before she invited him to meet her in St. Petersburg. He rushed off in a frenzy of hope and ecstasy, and could hardly contain himself when he saw his "Polar Star" for the first time in ten years. But again the interview was a tragic one, for she refused to listen to his ardent pleas for marriage. Her family and her daughter still stood in her path. . . .

This terrible disappointment was too much for him; when he returned to Paris he fell ill with inflammation of the brain, and his life hung by a thread. But when Madame Hanska, overpowered by her consuming passion, announced that she would marry him some day in spite of everything, he pulled through with that superhuman strength his hope gave him.

And for the next seven years he was sustained by her promises. He dogged her footsteps all over Europe, wherever she traveled with her daughter or with relatives. He followed her to Baden, to Wiesbaden, to Brussels, Rome, Dresden, Strassburg, St. Petersburg, and then back to Paris. In his persistent ardor, he spent his last cent on a beautiful house in the Rue Fortunée, which he kept filling with lavish decorations and furniture to make a fitting home for his bride-to-be.

Another obstacle was removed from their path when Madame Hanska's daughter, Anna, was married to a wealthy Polish count. Balzac, his hopes heightened, redoubled his efforts to gain her consent, until, in 1846, she finally allowed him definitely to announce their betrothal.

But still the marriage was cruelly delayed. Madame Hanska, torn by the great conflict between the dictates of her heart and the dictates of her family, refused to take the one step that would unite her to her lover. It was made still harder by the fact that, in marrying Balzac, she would have to forfeit her beautiful estate, under a prevailing law. And so she kept putting him off, relieving his anxiety by conducting—from a distance—his preparations of their Paris home.

In 1847 she actually came to Paris to look at the house, and approved of his arrangements. That same year she invited him to her estate in Wierzchownia, where he remained six months, always begging her to fulfill his greatest wish. But he returned to Paris disappointed again. As an outlet for his bitterness and grief he plunged headlong into the Revolutions of 1848, joining in all the turbulent demonstrations. It is said that he marched with the frenzied mob to Versailles, where he succeeded in ripping a piece of tapestry from the throne of Louis-Philippe—the king who had banned his play from the stage.

At the end of the year he went to Wierzchownia, waiting in terrific suspense for Madame Hanska to make up her mind. His hope was beginning to waver:

"I must regard the project which brought me here as *indefinitely postponed*," he wrote his sister with ironic pessimism.

But Madame Hanska was unable to hesitate much longer, and announced finally that she

was ready for the ceremony. Then, following the tragic sequence of misfortunes and tribulations which seemed to pursue them, Balzac fell ill and had to remain in bed for days. . . . The frenzied life of work and love had claimed its toll at last; his robust constitution had broken down, his tremendous energy was deserting him. . . .

"Alas," wrote Madame Hanska to her brother, "there is so much sadness in this wonderful romance! So much sorrow and anxiety on my part at least. I know only too well that M. de Balzac is doomed. Even with the best of care he cannot live very long, for his organism is entirely worn out by the hard battle he has had to fight, and by all the disillusions which have crowded upon him." And her words were all too true.

But Balzac refused to give in to his sickness until he had seen his greatest wish fulfilled. He came out of his fever miraculously, and announced that he was well enough to get married and accompany his bride to Paris. Madame Hanska could hardly refuse what she knew to be one of his last requests, so the two set out in March, 1850.

Balzac, in the highest excitement and exultation, wrote his mother, instructing her to fill the house with "flowers, beautiful, beautiful flowers!" And three days later he dispatched two more letters, one to her and one to his sister:

"Yesterday [March 15th] at Bersht-chiff, in the parish church of St. Barbara, a delegate of

the bishop Jalomir, a saintly and virtuous priest, closely resembling our own Abbé Henoux, confessor of the Duchesse d'Angoulême, blessed and celebrated our marriage." And he signed the one to Laure: "Your brother Honoré; at the Summit of Happiness."

They went to Paris by way of Dresden, where Balzac had an acute attack of heart trouble and was forced to remain several days, so that it was not until the midnight of May 29th that they drove up before the little house in the Rue Fortunée. To their surprise, the door was locked and the windows darkened. When a locksmith let them in, they found that a servant had gone insane, and his piercing cries came from the kitchen. Balzac turned on the lamps and disclosed a dazzling array of flowers, flowers in every nook and cranny—faithfully arranged by his mother. The bride shuddered. It was beautiful, but it was also funereal. . . .

For seventeen long years Balzac had courted this woman. Now, five months after she had yielded to him, he yielded himself to Death.

But not without a terrific struggle. The feeling that the gigantic structure of his *Comédie Humaine* was still incomplete gave him a fierce desire to live. There were more books to write: he must live to write them.

And he was absolutely amazed when his superhuman efforts did not prevent that mighty engine from slowing down. There is more amazement than anguish in the brief sentence he scrawled on a letter to Théophile Gautier,

dictated to his wife: "I can no longer read or write!"

Late in the sweltering afternoon of August 17, 1850, the doctor, having exhausted all the resources of his science, stood at the bedside with idle hands. Suddenly Balzac seized his sleeve and insisted on learning his fate.

"You are very courageous," said the doctor. "I shall not hide the truth from you. There is no hope."

The muscles of Balzac's face grew taut, his hands clutched at the bed-clothes. But his voice was steady:

"How long have I to live?"

"You will hardly live the night."

For a moment a gleam of hope appeared in Balzac's eyes, that tremendous hope which had always sustained him in his darkest moments, giving him strength to weather the great storms. . . .

"Call Bianchon!" he muttered. "Bianchon can save me! . . . Bianchon . . ." For that doctor of his own creation, who had relieved so much suffering in the pages of the *Comédie Humaine*, that character out of a world in which Balzac lived half his life, had become altogether real to him. But it is doubtful that even the capable Horace Bianchon, "a surgeon to whom science is indebted for a grand physiological idea" (*Atheist's Mass*), could have saved him at this stage of the game. . . .

Victor Hugo, hearing that his friend was dying, hurried to his bedside. He found Bal-

zac alone, and was told that "Madame de Balzac had retired to her rooms." Had his "Polar Star" deserted him? Princess Radziwell claims that her aunt was dangerously ill herself, and was forced to remain in bed, although she admits that toward the last an element of bitterness had entered their romance. At any rate, no one can question Madame de Balzac's loyalty. During the thirty-six years she survived her husband, she settled all his debts and saw that such important works as were published posthumously were brought out properly. Faithful until the last, she died in the very room in which he had died, and was entombed beside him. . . .

Victor Hugo, alone with his friend, seized his hand, but there was no response. On his way out he saw a bust of Balzac, made when he was at the height of his power, with a profile like that of Napoleon. The contrast of the mortal and the immortal overwhelmed him with its tragic sublimity. That night he faced his guests and said with deep emotion:

"Gentlemen, Europe is about to lose a great mind!"

"Glory is the sun of the dead," wrote Balzac, and so it was when it shone upon him. The shock of his death awakened the world to his genius. Even his most bitter enemies felt his loss, and two of them, Alexandre Dumas, *père*, and the critic, Sainte-Beuve, were pall-bearers at his funeral.

And before the vast, silent throng gathered at the grave, Victor Hugo paid a last glowing tribute to his friend:

"The work he has bequeathed to us," he concluded, "is built of granite strength. Great men forge their own pedestal; the future charges itself with the statue. . . . His life was short but full, fuller in works than in days. Alas, this puissant, untried laborer, this philosopher, this thinker, this poet, this genius lived among us the life of storm and stress common in all times to great men. Today he is at rest. He has entered simultaneously into glory and the tomb."